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TAGS: EAID LE MOPS NO PGOV PREL PTER IS

SUBJECT: NORWEGIAN FM'S VISIT TO SYRIA, LEBANON, GAZA STRIP
AND ISRAEL

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REF: STATE 172274

CLASSIFIED BY: DCM KEVIN M. JOHNSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: NORWEGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER JONAS GAHR STOERE RETURNED 8 NOVEMBER FROM A SCHEDULED VISIT TO DAMASCUS AND BEIRUT THAT INCLUDED A SURPRISE STOP IN THE GAZA STRIP AND ISRAEL. DURING HIS MEETING WITH STOERE, SYRIAN PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD EMPHASIZED HIS INTEREST IN DIALOGUE WITH THE U.S. AND NOTED THAT EUROPE CAN PLAY A ROLE IN ARRANGING THIS. PM SINIORA IN BEIRUT DISMISSED SHI, A CLAIMS FOR MORE POLITICAL POWER, ASKED FOR STOERE'S INTERVENTION WITH ISRAEL ON OVERFLIGHTS AND THANKED THE NORWEGIANS FOR ADDING LEBANON TO THEIR LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT AID PROGRAM. STOERE'S SURPRISE STOP IN THE GAZA STRIP AND ISRAEL FOCUSED ON HELPING PRESIDENT ABBAS TO SELL HIS UNITY GOVERNMENT PACKAGE TO THE ISRAELIS. END SUMMARY.

FIRST TO DAMASCUS

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¶2. (C) SYRIAN AND LEBANON DESK OFFICER KJETIL HALVORSEN, WHO ACCOMPANIED STOERE ON HIS VISIT AND ATTENDED THE MEETINGS IN DAMASCUS AND BEIRUT, MET WITH POLOFF ON 14 NOVEMBER TO GIVE A DETAILED ACCOUNTING OF THE FM'S MID-EAST VISIT. ON MONDAY 6 NOVEMBER, STOERE MET WITH PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASSAD AND THEN WITH FOREIGN MINISTER WALID AL-MUALLIM TO DISCUSS THE REGION'S CONFLICTS AND BILATERAL ISSUES. HALVORSEN CHARACTERIZES THE MEETING WITH THE PRESIDENT AS VERY PERSONAL AND UNSCRIPTED, AS AL-ASSAD ATTENDED WITHOUT ANY 'RETIINUE' AND SPOKE WITHOUT NOTES. THE FIRST ITEM DISCUSSED WAS THE UNITED STATES, AS AL-ASSAD SAID THAT HE WANTS DIALOGUE AND THAT EUROPE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY IN CONVINCING THE USG TO TAKE PART IN DIALOGUE. STOERE SAID THAT DIALOGUE IS THE WAY FORWARD, AND OFFERED TO DO HIS PART TO ENCOURAGE USG PARTICIPATION IN DIALOGUE. STOERE ALSO URGED AL-ASSAD TO ENGAGE SURROUNDING COUNTRIES IN THE PEACE PROCESS AND SHOW THAT IT IS A COMMITTED PARTNER. 'DEEDS, NOT WORDS', STOERE SAID, ARE WHAT SYRIA WILL BE JUDGED ON.

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¶ 13. (C) REGARDING THE REGION, AL-ASSAD STATED THE SYRIA WOULD SUPPORT A PALESTINIAN NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT AND STATED THAT IRAQ IS ON THE VERGE OF CIVIL WAR, WHICH THREATENS SYRIAN STABILITY. HE SAID THAT HIS FM WILL BE TRAVELING TO BAGHDAD AND THAT THEY MAY ESTABLISH DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN THE NEAR FUTURE. STOERE MENTIONED THAT HE SEES NO 'ACTIVE' ROLE FOR NORWAY IN IRAQ.

¶ 14. (C) STOERE THEN MET WITH AL-MUALLIM, WHO NOTED THAT ALTHOUGH SYRIA WAS WILLING TO PAY REPARATIONS FOR THE NORWEGIAN EMBASSY THAT WAS DESTROYED IN RIOTS THIS YEAR THE AMERICAN SANCTIONS MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO PAY YOU FOR IT.' DESPITE SEVERAL DEMARCHE FROM POST ON THE PURPORTED SYRIAN THREAT TO THE SINIORA GOVERNMENT OF LEBANON (REFTEL A), STOERE DID NOT MENTION IT TO EITHER AL-ASSAD OR AL-MUALLIM. NOTE: HALVORSEN, AND ONE CAN ASSUME STOERE, ASSESSES AL-ASSAD AS A CARD PLAYER WHO WANTS TO KNOW 'WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?' AND THAT HE MADE IT CLEAR THAT THERE IS NO POINT IN CHANGING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAN BECAUSE IT BENEFITS HIS GOVERNMENT, SUGGESTING FINANCIAL SUPPORT.

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THEN TO BEIRUT

¶ 15. (C) IN LEBANON, STOERE VISITED NORWEGIAN TROOPS AND SAILORS PARTICIPATING IN THE UNIFIL MISSION, AND THEN MEET WITH PM SINIORA. STOERE DISCUSSED HIS VISIT TO SYRIA, AND SINIORA STATED THAT EUROPE SHOULD COORDINATE ITS APPROACH TO SYRIA AS IT SEEMS DISJOINTED. SINIORA FURTHER NOTED THAT THE SHI'A DEMANDS FOR ONE-THIRD OF THE GOVERNMENT IS A FRIGHTENING REMINDER OF 'THE OLD DAYS UNDER SYRIAN RULE AND THAT HE ABSOLUTELY OPPOSES IT. SINIORA COMPLAINED THAT ISRAEL OVERFLIGHTS WERE THREATENING STABILITY IN LEBANON AND ASKED FOR NORWEGIAN ASSISTANCE TO PUT A STOP TO THEM AND TO HELP WITH THE REMOVAL OF CLUSTER BOMBS LEFT IN THE WAKE OF THE SUMMER'S CONFLICT. HE ALSO SAID THAT THERE ARE 8,000 LEBANESE SOLDIERS ON THE SYRIAN BORDER, AND THAT UN CLAIMS OF SMUGGLING ARE SIMPLY NOT TRUE. STOERE TOOK THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE VISIT TO ANNOUNCE THAT LEBANON WILL BE ADDED TO NORWAY'S LONG-TERM FOREIGN ASSISTANCE LIST, AND THAT IN 2007 THEY WILL RECEIVE NORWEGIAN AID (NON-DISASTER/HUMANITARIAN)

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FOR THE FIRST TIME.

AND A SURPRISE TRIP TO GAZA AND ISRAEL

¶ 16. (C) HALVORSEN SAID THAT HE DID NOT KNOW IF IT WAS THE

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RESULT OF AN INVITATION OR AN INITIATIVE OF STOERE, BUT AFTER DEPARTING BEIRUT, THEY TRAVELED TO TEL AVIV ON TUESDAY THE 7TH AND STOERE WENT TO MEET WITH PRESIDENT ABBAS IN THE GAZA STRIP. ABBAS TOLD STOERE THAT HE WAS THE FIRST FM TO VISIT GAZA IN SEVEN MONTHS, AND HE ASKED FOR STOERE'S ASSISTANCE IN SELLING THE UNITY GOVERNMENT THAT HE HOPED TO PUT TOGETHER IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE. THE NEXT MORNING, 8 NOVEMBER, STOERE HAD A PRIVATE ONE-HOUR MEETING WITH TZIPI LIVNI. THE ATTACK ON BEIT HANOUN OCCURRED IN THE NIGHT BETWEEN HIS MEETINGS, AND STOERE'S LAST WORDS AS HE BOARDED THE PLANE TO RETURN TO OSLO WERE THAT ISRAEL HAD THE RIGHT TO DEFEND ITSELF, BUT THAT HE CONDEMNED THE ATTACK.

WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP?

¶ 17. (C) COMMENT: NORWAY HAS BEEN A HEAVY-HITTER IN PROVIDING AID TO THE PALESTINIANS AND IS NOW UPGRADING LEBANON TO THEIR LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT AID PROGRAM. THIS IS IN KEEPING WITH APPARENT INTEREST IN THE FM'S OFFICE TO FOCUS ON FOREIGN

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POLICY ON THE MIDDLE EAST IN A BID TO STRENGTHEN THEIR
POSITION AS NEGOTIATORS. STOERE HAS MENTIONED IN INTERNAL
MFA MEETINGS THAT HIS LIST OF PRIORITIES IS "NUMBER ONE: THE
MIDDLE EAST. THERE IS NO NUMBER TWO." HE PLANS TO DOUBLE THE
SIZE OF HIS MID-EAST SECTION IN THE MFA, AND HAS ALREADY
ARRANGED FOR TWO NEW OFFICERS TO COME IN BY THE END OF THIS
YEAR TO HELP THE OVER-BURDENED EIGHT OFFICERS WHO WORK THERE.
END COMMENT.

WHITNEY